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Kotzer, Yigal
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YIGAL KOTZER

Ninety-eight Jews waiting to make aliya are reportedly trapped in the Baku airport because Russian airliners are grounded by a fuel shortage. The group was attempting to travel from the Azerbaijani capital to Odessa to catch the ship that brings immigrants to Israel.

According to Steven Leitel, head of the Ebenezer Emergency Fund – the British-based Evangelical Christian organization which sponsors the voyages – Jews from the Caucasus region are currently traveling to Odessa by train, in hope of getting their in time for the next sailing.

"There are also hundreds of Jews from Moldova who wanted to fly to Odessa, but did not receive permission from the authorities," he said.

He claimed thousands of Jews are currently trying to reach Odessa in time for the next voyage.

Yesterday morning, the Mediterranean Sky arrived in Haifa with 371 immigrants aboard.

"This time, we didn't have any particular difficulty; we didn't have to pay bribes," Leitel said. "I think everything will be okay from here on in."

Ebenezer plans one more immigrant voyage before establishing regular service from Odessa to Haifa in the spring.

Learning from the experience of the first voyage, this time the Mediterranean Sky was equipped with signs in Russian explaining proper behavior at sea. Nonetheless, the olim brought parcels of food and gas burners with them. "It was a miracle we didn't have a tragedy," one Ebenezer worker said.

The newcomers were directed to homes throughout the country yesterday by Absorption Ministry workers.

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